

SELECT BOARD

Fiscal Year 2011

This was a successful and productive year for the Select Board on many fronts, and we are pleased to offer this report on our activities.

Management and Budget

Town Management

The Select Board's most significant action this year was in overseeing transition in the Town Manager position. Larry Shaffer's retirement was announced on August 30th, and we negotiated an end date for his service of September 30th, with a payment equivalent to four months' salary.

With an eminently qualified Assistant Town Manager, John Musante, willing to fill the top seat, the Select Board considered whether conducting a formal search was necessary or desirable, and asked the public for feedback. The overwhelming response from the community was to skip the search and appoint Mr. Musante to the position, and we did. He took over on October 1st, enabling a seamless transition and no loss of momentum in the Town's work. Mr. Musante accepted the position at the same salary Mr. Shaffer was receiving, and was paid an additional \$10,000 as compensation for the several months he would need to continue to fill the Finance Director's role while recruiting a replacement.

The nine months of FY 11 under Mr. Musante's leadership have been positive and successful. The Select Board and Town Manager are working productively together, with strong communication and great mutual respect. Mr. Musante hired Debra Roussel as Assistant to the Town Manager, filling an administrative vacancy in the Select Board/Town Manager office, and that has proved to be an excellent choice. This has been a tremendous first year.

The Select Board would like to give special thanks to Debbie Gordon, for being the calm and helpful constant in the Select Board/Town Manager's office, bridging the transition from old to new. We would also like to thank Libby Lass for relocating from the Conservation and Development department to return to the third floor for several months, to provide assistance during that time. The excellent work of Ms. Gordon, Ms. Lass and Ms. Roussel enabled the Select Board to do its job, we are so appreciative of all of their help this year.

FY 12 Budget Process

The process of developing the FY 12 budget was less fraught and all-consuming than it has been in recent years. This was due to several factors:

State Aid: Marginal improvement and decreased volatility in the State's budget situation gave us more stability in our State Aid projections. While there was still uncertainty, the worst-case-scenario baseline was better than previous years, and uncertainty was all about how much higher the aid amounts might be than first projected – much better than “how much lower.”

2010 Override: Last year's successful property tax override provided \$1.7 million in new local revenue. Without it, the equivalent amount of cuts would have been necessary. The override was intended to stabilize and protect core services funding, and it did.

Good Process: The Select Board's own process for creating Budget Policy Guidelines for the Town Manager continues to strengthen and improve, as do the collaborative processes of the Budget Coordinating Group and Joint Capital Planning Committee. Representatives from the Select Board, School Committee, Library Trustees, Finance Committee and their chief administrative staff continue to enhance efforts to share information and to create and support cross-budget priorities, allowing for unified recommendations to Town Meeting. The transparency of the process allows interested citizens to follow the development of the budget, prioritization of funding, and more.

Significant New or Continued Initiatives

Continuing Strengths: Efforts to provide better structure and organization continue to show benefit and continue to be tweaked for further improvement. The Town Manager evaluation and goal-setting process, determination of budget policy guidelines, and adhering to a standard calendar for managing annual responsibilities have been very successful. Implementation gets easier each year, thanks to all the time and effort we put into their creation a couple years ago.

New Policies Regarding Parking and Traffic: We standardized the system for handling parking space reservations for events – all requests are now handled by the Select Board, rather than some going through the Collector’s Office. We approved new on-street meter rates of 50 cents per hour, making those equivalent to the rates in what had been the pay-and-display lots, and we reduced annual residential and employment parking permits to \$25 per year and increased annual lower garage level space rental to \$750 per year, all effective June 1st, all part of the downtown parking improvement plan which will involve new pay-by-space machines in the garage and other parking lots, to be installed in early FY 12. We approved installation of “speed tables” as a traffic calming device on Sunset Avenue and McClelland Street, in conjunction with their repaving this year, and for Lincoln Avenue when it is scheduled for repaving next year. This tool is expected to be more widely used in the future, if it proves successful on those streets.

New Tax Work-Off Program Limits: The Select Board approved increasing the hourly rate and the maximum amount of property tax that can be covered by eligible seniors providing work assistance in various town departments. The maximum was increased from \$750 to \$1,000 per year, and the hourly rate increased from \$7.50 to \$8.00.

New Voting Precincts: Following the 2010 Federal Census, the Select Board was required by the Amherst Town Government Act to appoint a Districting Advisory Board to make recommendations on necessary precinct changes for submission to the State. We appointed a nine-member board which did its complicated work quickly and efficiently over the spring of 2011, and we accepted their recommendations. These were approved by the State, and new precincts will go into effect for 2012, representing new polling locations for some voters and necessitating a new election for every Town Meeting seat. Additionally, on the Select Board’s behalf, the Town Clerk is pursuing a challenge to some of the census block results.

Town-Gown Relations: The Select Board has increased its efforts at addressing Town-Gown issues and playing an active role in seeking solutions. We held our second annual Coffee Hour with UMass student leaders and the administrators who work with them, bringing them together with Town staff to establish contacts and build communication channels, which was a big success and well-received by all. Participation in the Campus and Community Coalition has increased, with successful efforts to address municipal concerns by changing the Code of Student Conduct to state clearly that it applies equally to both on and off-campus behavior. We have also worked to strengthen relationships and clarify expectations with liquor license holders through the CCC’s Retail Partners subcommittee. The Select Board received a Lamplighter Award from the CCC for these efforts. Additionally, the Select Board works with and supports the Town Manager in the many efforts he is making to address multi-faceted Town and Gown issues.

Revised Policy for the Town’s Commemorative Flags: A couple of years ago, a policy was approved to display the Town’s commemorative flags on September 11th every three years, based on the 1/3rd support a request to display them annually had received at Town Meeting. 2010 was a non-display year, and we received a new request to fly them annually. The Select Board instead changed the policy from every three years to every five years, so that the flags would fly on the milestone anniversaries: the 10 year anniversary in 2011, the 15 year anniversary in 2016, and so forth. This was done by a split vote of 3-2, with the minority preferring the annual display.

Policy for New Emergency Winter Shelter: With the planned creation of an emergency winter shelter, a significant upgrade from the permitted “warming place” of the previous year, there were two issues of significant disagreement between advocates for the homeless and the Town Manager. Town Manager Larry Shaffer preferred, based on recommendations from public health and public safety staff, a “dry” shelter, with admittance open only to men. The Committee on Homelessness and other advocates felt strongly that a behavior-based admission policy was better than one based on evident drug or alcohol use, and that women and men could be safely accommodated together. The Select Board voiced unanimous support the latter, which became shelter policy and proved to be successful in its first year.

Revising Appointed Committee Handbook: At the beginning of FY 11, we began the process of revising and updating the Appointed Committee Handbook, and had nearly completed the process by the end of the year.

Advocacy

The Select Board lends its voice to issues of importance or concern locally and beyond. Among the positions we took in FY 11 and supported by letter, resolution, newspaper column, position paper, or TV and radio interview were:

- Opposing the Department of Conservation and Recreation's request to waive an Environmental Impact Report by the Department of Environmental Protection for planned reconstruction work on the Norwottuck Rail Trail, which called for significant changes in the Lawrence Swamp area;
 - Providing comment on the July 1, 2010 revision of the State's Open Meeting Law;
 - Recommending No votes on November 2010 ballot Question 1 (to eliminate the new sales tax on alcohol) and Question 3 (to reduce the State sales tax from 6.25% to 3%);
 - Recommending restoration of DCR funds for park operation in the State budget;
 - Recommending support of legislation to reduce packaging waste by extending producer responsibility;
 - Recommending support for "An Act to Reinvest in Our Communities" – a proposal for progressive State income tax;
- Recommending opposition to the extension of the license for the Vermont Yankee facility.

Additionally, the Select Board did extensive advocacy and outreach in support of the Town Meeting warrant article enabling pursuit of a solar array on the old landfill. We also provided strong advocacy in support of the Gateway visioning process and the comprehensive permit for the Olympia Oaks affordable housing project.

Notable Elements of FY 11

The Select Board has a fairly standard roster of responsibilities each year, including license approvals and renewals, public way requests, recommendations from committees, responses to citizen questions and concerns, and recurring issues and events. Every year also includes some unique and memorable elements, however, and among those for FY 11 were:

The visit by the Mayor of Kanegasaki: The Select Board attended a reception in honor of the visit by a delegation from our Sister City, and attended a meeting to become better acquainted and discuss ways to assist each other in the future. The highlight of the visit was Mayor Takahashi's address to Town Meeting.

A process for designing a Town Flag has begun, and we hope to soon have Amherst represented with so many other communities in the Hall of Flags at the State House in Boston.

We opted to no longer require applicants for new Taxi Driver licenses to attend our meetings to speak to their request: paperwork by office staff, and background checks and recommendation from the Police Chief are sufficient for our approval, thus saving time for us and the applicants, and improving the efficiency of our meetings.

We changed how we handle minutes, a task that has always been onerous for us. Now the Town Manager takes notes at the meeting and Debra Roussel combines those with the post-meeting lists provided by the Chair to create complete and efficient minutes. This has been a huge help to the Select Board.

A joint meeting was held in April with the Library Trustees to elect someone to fill the Trustee vacancy created by the resignation of Kathy Wang. At this meeting, Austin Sarat was elected and he will serve until the next Annual Town Election.

With sadness, we note that Eva Schiffer passed away in November of 2010. She was a former Select Board member, among other important positions she held in town government, and was a friend and inspiration to all of us.

Membership

The Select Board membership remained constant during FY 11. At the Annual Town Election, Stephanie O'Keeffe and Diana Stein were re-elected to second terms. The Select Board re-elected Stephanie O'Keeffe as Chair and Aaron Hayden as Clerk, and we continue the tradition of monthly alphabetic rotation of the Vice-Chair.

Select Board membership for FY 11 was as follows:

Alisa Brewer
Aaron Hayden
Stephanie O'Keeffe
Diana Stein
Jim Wald

Respectfully submitted, Stephanie O'Keeffe, Chair